

Marinades Make the World Taste Better

Flavorful Rural Exports

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The French city of Paris may be the gourmet capital of the world, but another Paris is making its mark on food and flavor. Betsy and Dave Wilcox, recognizing a market for their homegrown marinades, founded Allegro Fine Foods in 1978 in Paris, Tennessee. They had developed their recipe in 1955, looking for an inexpensive and easy way to spice up their meals. It was not long before the recipe became popular in their hometown. Almost 50 years later, Allegro Fine Foods proudly distributes its marinades throughout the United States and has ventured into international markets as well.

The 25 employees of Allegro have applied creative strategies to make exporting easier. And they are not just doing it for themselves. "Exporting is good for our community," said International Marketing Director Rick Horiuchi recently. He understands what more jobs mean for Paris, a rural town with a population below 10,000. It is this community focus that has allowed Allegro to expand internationally while maintaining a small-town approach to building personal relationships and establishing trust among its clients and distributors.

As a small business, Allegro has had to work harder than larger companies to

enter the global marketplace. Allegro has taken advantage of services and information offered through the U.S. Commercial Service, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Foreign Agricultural Service, and the Southern United States Trade Association (SUSTA). Because Allegro does not have the resources of a large international marketing department, these services enable the company to compete globally.

"The exporting business is time-consuming and requires a lot of effort," said Horiuchi. "However, there are many services available to small exporters if they put forward the effort to find them."

Allegro exports to Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong. Horiuchi explained that Allegro broke into Asian markets through hard work, persistence, and personal connections. The company now has a strong presence in Asia, with Washington-based distributors who export their marinades to the Pacific Rim. Horiuchi has recently started exploring the Mexican and Canadian markets as part of an aggressive export strategy. As Allegro widens its international reach, Horiuchi has found that creating personal relationships and understanding local business cultures are key to successful exporting. As Allegro's presence in Mexico grows, Horiuchi may even take a Spanish language course to communicate better with Mexican clients.



(L to R) Dr. Ernest Moser, Raul Urteaga Trani, Rick Horiuchi, Ree Russell, and Dr. Paul Crapo gather during a NAFTA conference at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

Photo courtesy of the University of Tennessee at Martin.

FROM PARIS TO MEXICO AND BEYOND

In the last three years, Allegro has actively targeted Mexican supermarkets to distribute its marinades, which are available in original, hot and spicy, and hickory smoke flavors. These products are kosher certified, with Mexican standard 051 English/Spanish labels. Allegro's main supermarket chain customer is HEB/Mexico, with 20 stores in northern Mexico. Allegro also distributes its products to Super Gigante in Baja California and Monterrey, Mexico, and the company plans to expand to southern Mexico.

Since 2000, Allegro has worked closely with the Memphis U.S. Export Assistance Center (USEAC), part of the global network of the U.S. Commercial Service. According to Horiuchi, USEAC Director Ree Russell and the rest of the Memphis office staff have been a tremendous help to Allegro. They provide market information, suggest trade events, and promote Allegro products in rural Tennessee as well as overseas. Horiuchi regularly attends conferences and other events in Tennessee that are sponsored or recommended by Russell and her staff. And at some events, like the North American Free Trade Agreement Conference in October 2002, Horiuchi has served as a panel speaker and met Canadian and Mexican government officials. This conference took place at the University of Tennessee in Martin, which is part of the rural community that includes Paris.

As part of Allegro's strategy to penetrate the Canadian market, Ree Russell put Horiuchi in touch with Crystal Roberts, a commercial specialist in the Calgary office of the Commercial Service. Roberts represented Allegro Fine Foods at the Red Deer Trade Show in November, and she is currently seeking Canadian distributors for Allegro's products.

"The Commercial Service has been very beneficial to us, and there are



Allegro Fine Foods makes marinades with flavors such as teriyaki, hot and spicy, and hickory smoke, as well as mesquite and roasted garlic "flavor injectors" that can be inserted directly into meats.

Photo courtesy of Allegro Fine Foods.

services offered to make everyone happy," said Horiuchi. "The resources and information are available, so why not use them?"

SPICING UP EXPORTING OPPORTUNITIES

Not content to conquer Asian, Mexican, and Canadian markets, Allegro is exploring export opportunities in Australia, New Zealand, and various European countries. Allegro attributes its aggressive international expansion in part to its dedication to using the many resources that are available to small businesses.

Horiuchi's advice for other small or rural businesses includes maintaining a focus on exporting and consistently attending trade shows overseas. Allegro frequently uses the SUSTA market access program (MAP), which sponsors international activities by providing money for small and medium-sized businesses to travel to trade shows. Through MAP funds, Allegro has translated labels into

Spanish and Japanese, as well as implemented direct mailings and other promotional campaigns. "The program has been very beneficial to Allegro, and I would recommend this for other small companies," said Horiuchi.

Horiuchi warns companies that they must be committed and focused if they are to be successful exporters. He stresses patience, diligence, and trust. "It is necessary for companies to have at least one or more people dedicated to international business and marketing," noted Horiuchi. "Plus, there must be an upper-management commitment to pursuing international business."

Exporting has enabled a family marinade recipe from Tennessee to span the globe. Marinades once enjoyed solely in a small, rural community are now internationally recognized. This success is not lost on Horiuchi: "With the rapid diffusion of technology, it is now possible for small businesses to reach the other side of the world in a way that they could not before." ■